



# How Do We Count Jesus' "Three Days and Three Nights" in the Tomb?

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The question of how Jesus Christ spent three days and three nights in the tomb is one that many believers, both new and seasoned, have grappled with. The confusion arises from trying to reconcile the timeline of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection with the phrase *"three days and three nights."* Understanding this in light of Scripture, historical Jewish customs, and the context in which the events took place can bring clarity to this profound mystery of our faith.

The source of the difficulty comes from a specific passage where Jesus foretells His death and resurrection. In [Matthew 12:40](#), Jesus says, *"For as Jonah was in the belly of the huge fish three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights."* At first glance, this seems to suggest a literal 72-hour period—three full days and three full nights—from His death to His resurrection. However, when we examine the Gospels and the traditional timeline of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, we know that Jesus was crucified on Friday (often referred to as Good Friday) and rose from the dead on Sunday (Easter Sunday). This span of time, by our modern reckoning, seems more like two nights and one full day, leading to confusion.

The key to resolving this apparent contradiction lies in understanding the way time was reckoned in Jewish culture during Jesus' time. The Jewish people counted any part of a day as representing a whole day. In other words, a *"day and night"* did not necessarily mean a complete 24-hour period. This is an important aspect of ancient Jewish timekeeping that helps us understand the three days and nights Jesus referred to. The first "day" begins on Friday. Jesus was crucified in the morning and died in the afternoon, which would count as *"day one"* according to Jewish tradition. Jesus' body was laid in the tomb before the Sabbath began at sunset on Friday, and that evening marks the beginning of the second *"day"* (Friday night). Saturday is the second full day (Saturday day and night), and Sunday morning is the third *"day,"* as Jesus rose from the dead early on Sunday. So, by the Jewish reckoning, from Friday to Sunday morning is counted as *"three days."*

Let's break down this timeline further, including the beginning and end of each day according to Jewish reckoning, which begins at sunset. On Thursday evening, Jesus celebrated the Last Supper with His disciples and was later arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. Friday morning, marking the first day, Jesus was brought before Pilate ([John 18:28](#)). By noon, He was crucified, and at 3 PM, Jesus gave up His spirit and died ([Matthew 27:45-50](#)). Before sunset, His body was placed in the tomb ([Mark 15:42-46](#)). As the sun set, the Sabbath began, marking the start of the second day. Throughout Saturday, the second day, Jesus' body remained in the tomb. As the sun set that evening, the Sabbath ended, and the third day began. Before dawn on Sunday, the third day, Jesus resurrected. Early that morning, Mary Magdalene and other women discovered the empty tomb ([Matthew 28:1-6](#)). This timeline aligns perfectly with Jesus' prophecy of being in the "heart of the earth" for three days and three nights. While it doesn't constitute three full 24-hour periods by modern standards, it fulfills the prophecy according to the Jewish method of counting any part of a day as a whole day.

The three days and nights not only fulfilled prophecy but also carry deep spiritual significance. Just as Jonah spent three days in the belly of the fish before being "resurrected" to preach repentance ([Jonah 1:17](#)), so Jesus spent three days in the tomb, after which He rose again, bringing salvation to the world. Furthermore, the resurrection of Jesus on the third day signifies triumph over death and sin, marking the beginning of a new creation. As Paul writes in [Romans 6:9](#), *"because we know that Christ, having been raised from the dead, will not die again. Death no longer rules over Him."* The period of His death and resurrection also serves as a foreshadowing of the ultimate resurrection that awaits all believers, a promise of eternal life for those who follow Him ([1 Corinthians 15:20-22](#)).

In today's context, this truth continues to offer hope and assurance. Jesus' resurrection on the third day is central to Christian belief and reminds us of God's faithfulness in fulfilling His promises. It can be easy to become caught up in the precise counting of days and nights, but the deeper meaning lies in the victory over death and the guarantee of eternal life for those who believe. The counting methods, while important for understanding Scripture, should not overshadow the glorious outcome of these events. Moreover, in a world filled with uncertainties and distractions, understanding the faithfulness of God's promises through the timeline of Jesus' death and resurrection can provide comfort. As we reflect on His sacrifice and triumph, we are reminded that even in our darkest times, God's plans are unfolding, just as they did in the three days leading to the resurrection.

In short, the question of how Jesus was in the tomb for three days and three nights can be confusing at first glance, but when understood in light of Jewish customs and biblical prophecy, it becomes clearer. Jesus was crucified on Friday, laid in the tomb before sunset, remained there during the Sabbath, and rose on Sunday morning. This fulfills the prophecy of *"three days and three nights"* when we understand how time was counted in His day. Ultimately, the precise counting of hours is less important than what these three days signify—the death, burial, and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ, which brings salvation to all who believe. Through this, we can rest assured that the promises of God are trustworthy, and just as Jesus rose on the third day, so too will those who are in Christ rise to eternal life ([John 11:25-26](#)).

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